My Friendly Enemy the Proofreader

By JULIAN STREET.

THE czar of the publisher's proof-room, who questions your grammar, catches your lapses in punctuation and spelling and is such a rabid purist that he corrects your dialect and insists on making your cotton field niggers speak Harvard English, is a most irritating sort of person. Even when one accepts the correction there is a certain indignation that longs for expression. But that's just the trouble. There is no one to say it to. There is only a mark in green or purple or red ink on the border of a galley proof.

There are times when I could cheerfully annihilate the person who marks my pages with needlessly stupid corrections, but after my indignation has simmered away, I remember the numberless times when this same autocrat of the blue pencil has pointed out some very bad holes. I remember on the galleys of my new book, "Rita Coventry," several notes of inaccuracies that showed mysterious knowledge on the part of the proofreader. For instance, when Rita, the prima donna, comes to dine with Parrish in his apartment, I had the host get out his last and most cherished bottle of Krug '98, a wine that I remember very pleasantly in connection with a stay in Paris twelve years ago.

The proofreader's note was something to this effect:

"Author: Champagne will not keep twenty-five years. The chances are about twenty to one that the bottle would not be good."

I asked a former wine merchant about it and found that in a case of champagne thirty years old there will be perhaps one good bottle, in a case twenty years old perhaps three good bottles, and so on in like ratio. I changed the date of the vintage. But how did that proofreader know? Was he a wine merchant in some earlier incarnation?

Again at a critical point in the story, Parrish, lying wide awake in his berth while the train stood in the Cleveland station, heard the knocking of a hammer on the car wheels, first far off, then nearer, and saw the inspector's torch flashing as it passed his window. The flare of the torch symbolized the light of understanding entering his mind as he realized with shame how shabbily he had neglected the Alice of the story.

But symbolism meant nothing to the ruthless proofreader who commented:

"Author: It is no longer customary on the New York Central lines to knock with a hammer on car wheels to test them for flaws. Better make the sound the slamming of journal box covers. Also the oil torches formerly used have been displaced by lamps with reflectors."

I verified the statement and reconstructed the paragraph. And again I marveled at the proofreader's omniscience and forgave him for questioning my dialect.

A Middle Course in Criticism

THE CRITICAL GAME. By John Macy. Boni & Liveright.

AS a critic Mr. Macy holds a middle course between the whimsical geniality of Clarence Day and the mordant wit of Mencken. He believes that

John Macy.

literature should be related to life. Hence his style is very informal. He seeks, to quote a phrase which he applies to William James, "to be dignified in mental shirt sleeves." His similes and comparisons are drawn from daily life.

He says: "Critics play with each other in a professional game. The few amateurs who sit as spectators are a select minority who have seen the game before and who though not in the professional class are instructed, cultivated, have some knowledge of the plays. The critical game is enjoyed by those who are themselves critical and least in need of enlightenment." He believes that at present criticism is improving. Mr. Macy also says: "I think I see a slight but appreciable improvement in candor, simplicity, generosity, geniality and fairness in attack. On the whole we are a little more sportsmanlike than some of our elders. This is all that I claim for us. Our real consolation is that the ancient and honorable game is still young, still to be played."

Mr. Macy says: "I am not as foolish as to take my essays very seriously, and I believe that if we fooled with literature in a lighter spirit we should enjoy it more and be happier. Charles Lamb was not afraid to kick up his heels and yet nobody will accuse him of being a trivial clown." In pursuance of this idea he begins his chapter on Dante in English by saying, "I am tempted to call the following remarks 'Reading Dante for Fun.'"

In his article on Joseph Conrad Mr. Macy is at his best. When he is not too flippant he is apt to be too sociological. He praises Strindberg for writing "stories, not tracts," and says of Tolstoy: "The feeling that Tolstoy the artist and Tolstoy the reformer are in any true sense engaged in struggle is largely due to the false dialectic of traditional criticism, which he by precept and practice has confuted." In the essays on Tagore, Woodberry, Catran and many others, Macy the reformer is too predominant. He has the same handicap which Lowell confessed to, of marching, "with a whole bale of *isms* tied together with rhyme."

Darrow on Crime

CRIME: ITS CAUSE AND TREATMENT. By Clarence Darrow. Thomas Y. Crowell Company.

FORTY years spent in practicing in our courts has not hardened Mr. Darrow toward criminals nor given him the cold blooded viewpoint of the scientific investigator of crime. On the contrary he discusses crime, its causes and treatment with a benign air that obviously springs from a profound sympathy with "criminals," who, he makes very plain, are too often the victims of conditions into which they have been forced by the circumstances of their beginnings and the untoward conditions of modern social and industrial life.

In his extensive discussion of crime, its various classifications and punishment, his main effort has been to show that the laws that control human behavior are as fixed and certain as those that control the physical world. And he says: "I am fully aware that this book will be regarded as a plea or an apology for the criminal. . . . Still if man's actions are governed by natural law, the sooner it is recognized and understood the sooner will sane treatment be adopted in dealing with crime. The sooner too will sensible and humane remedies be found for the treatment and cure of this most perplexing and painful manifestation of human behavior . . . I am convinced that if we were all-wise and all-understanding we would not condemn."

Mr. Darrow is not very optimistic about the improvement of the human race, for he says: "I am by no means sure that man has not run his race and reached, if not passed, the zenith of his power." And the one thing that seems more certain to him than any other as a preventative for criminal acts is that "life should be made easier for the great mass from which the criminal is ever coming. As far as experience and logic can prove anything, it is certain that every improvement in environment will lesson crime."